INTRODUCTION

Introductory Reflections

Two millennia ago a gifted poet in the Middle East composed the Earliest Christian Hymnbook. It is called the *Odes of Solomon*. The ancient Semite is the anonymous Odist, the poet laureate of Earliest Christianity.

Having studied the *Odes* since 1966, I believe the Odist received unique spiritual truths. His poetry explodes out of the genius of Jesus' Judaism and the energy released upon those who experienced God's resurrection of Jesus. Having ascended Mount Sinai and seeing the sun rise behind mountains thousands of miles to the East, and hearing the elevated worship of many in Greek, German, English, Hebrew, and Arabic, I sense that the Odist lived on the highest mountain peaks and shares with us his own moments of experiencing God before a burning bush.

The Odist is familiar to me. I seem to know him and share some of his experiences (as you probably have). With him I have seen fruits that are "full, even complete" in spring; I remember stopping, during a walk near the Jordan River, to examine pomegranates and other ripe fruits hanging invitingly from trees. It is easy to imagine with him that these "are full of Your salvation" (1:5). I have held in my hands the remains of burned timbers from the Temple Mount that went up into conflagration in 70 CE, and with the Odist I can affirm:

> No man can desecrate Your holy site, O my God;
> Nor can he alter it, and put it in another site.
> Because (he has) no power over it;
> For Your sanctuary You designed before You made special sites. (*Ode* 4:1–2)

Similar to the poetic vision in the Revelation of John, the Odist's words represent a subtle condemnation of the

Roman Emperor, Titus, who allowed the Temple and most of its treasures to disappear into smoke.

I can envision the Odist listening to the playing of a harp and imagining fresh poetry:

> As the [wind] moves through a harp
> And the strings speak,
> So the Spirit of the Lord speaks through my members,
> And I speak through His love. (*Ode* 6:1–2)

Experiencing a desert storm (a *hamzin*) in the Judean desert, facing death in the blazing heat in the loathsome shallows of the Dead Sea, coming up out of the Negev, exhausted and thirsty, fearing thirst would not be quenched, and yearning for the cool water and shade of Ein Gedi, I can appreciate the means by which the Odist expressed our eschatological hope:

> Then all the thirsty upon the earth drank,
> And thirst was relieved and quenched. (*Ode* 6:11)

Such thoughts do help us imagine a spring gushing forth its water (*Ode* 40:2) so we might "rest beside the spring;" the Lord's spring is indeed "pleasing and sparkling." This water is most "refreshing" (*Ode* 30:2–4).

Bending over to pick up a piece of marble from the first century in the Mediterranean near Caesarea Maritima and walking beside the Sea of Galilee in the predawn or dusk, I often will spy puffs of foam generated by the strong wind. The Odist knew such foam and used it to make a point:

> And ignorance appeared like dust,
> And like the foam of the sea. (*Ode* 18:11)

In early morning on the way to excavate at Bethsaida (the home of some of Jesus' disciples), I have seen the golden sun rise over the Golan Heights, dismissing the darkness, and felt the dew of the predawn as I drove down and across the Jordan River. As I think back on these experiences I better appreciate the Odist's fondness for

the sun; for him the sun symbolized the presence of God's enlightening warmth:

> And the Lord (is) like the sun
> Upon the face of the land.
>
> My eyes were enlightened,
> And my face received the dew;
>
> And my breath was refreshed
> By the pleasant fragrance of the Lord. (*Ode* 11:13–15)

These reflections appear again in *Ode* 15:

> As the sun is the joy to them who seek its daybreak,
> So my joy is the Lord;
>
> Because He is my sun,
> And His rays have restored me,
> And His light has dismissed all darkness from my face.
> (*Ode* 15:1–2)

Having seen doves mother those in their nests in Galilee, I can appreciate the Odist feeling that "the wings of the Spirit" were over his heart "as the wings of doves over their nestlings" (*Ode* 28:1). Like Jesus from Nazareth, he was a keen observer of nature.

The Odist's analogies are similar to Jesus' parables in which metaphors and images are true to nature. Both saw the affinity between heaven and earth. Vegetation and animal life in Galilee and other areas of the Middle East can arouse emotions if one allows nature to speak about its Creator. The Spirit often moved the Poet:

> When one is surrounded entirely (by) pleasing country,
> There is nothing divided in him.
>
> The likeness of that which is below
> Is that which is above. (*Ode* 34:3–4)

With this consummate Poet, I yearn for a future that is free of the past years' troubles. With him I believe life's purpose is to find moments to praise God and yearn at

all times for God's truth, as verdant fruit-bearing is the purpose of the vine and melody the purpose of the harp:

> Teach me the odes of Your truth,
> That I may produce fruits in You.
>
> And open to me the harp of Your Holy Spirit,
> So that through every note I may praise You, O Lord.
> (*Ode* 14:7–8)

With the Odist I can feel the presence of the living God and the Love that the ever-creating Creator shares with all of us. Worshipping with these *Odes* before me, I sense continuity with the Jewish geniuses who were roughly contemporaneous with Jesus, with Jesus' Judaism and its deep piety, and with Jesus and his passion for the Father. The following poetic insight seems to echo Jesus' devotion to God as Father and the Johannine concept that Jesus is the Word:

> The Father of knowledge
> Is the Word of knowledge.
>
> He who created wisdom
> Is wiser than His works. (*Ode* 7:7–8)

Helping us cultivate this unity with Jesus and with his earliest followers is the Odist's gift to each of us who wish to reconnect with our origins. We are allowed to experience our own spirituality in light of another religion, the Judaism Jesus knew. And we do so with a deep appreciation of kinship with all who love and worship the One and Only God.

The beauty of the *Odes* seems to lie in their spontaneous and joyous affirmation that the long-awaited Messiah has come to God's people:

> My joy is the Lord and my course is towards Him;
> This way of mine is beautiful.
>
> For there is a Helper for me, the Lord.
> He has generously shown Himself to me in His simplicity,
> Because His kindness has diminished His grandeur.
> (*Ode* 7:2–3)

The Complex Origin of the Hymnbook

When you read the translation of the Odist's masterpieces, you will probably imagine that his compositions are similar to the ode quoted by Paul in Philippians 2 and the Logos Hymn that begins the good news according to the Fourth Evangelist. You will be correct.

In all likelihood, the Odist was a Jew and may have been an Essene as Paul had been a Pharisee. That is, the Odist had some relationship with the Jewish sect or group that collected and wrote "the Dead Sea Scrolls." Why? It is because he seems to know the *Rule of the Community* (the *magna carta* of the Essenes) and the *Thanksgiving Hymns* (the hymns or odes of the Essenes). Eventually, he believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah (see *Ode* 24).

The Odist's poetry is similar to the Psalter, the Psalms of David. He often bases his odes or psalms on the Psalter, but unlike the Davidic Psalter he includes no lament in his collection that he may have attributed to David's son, Solomon. The spirituality of the *Odes* breathes an enthusiastic joy at the dawning of a new day. Why? It is because the Odist believes the Messiah has finally appeared.

Although the collection is "Christian," some *Odes* appear to be Jewish; that is, nothing uniquely Christian is found in some *Odes*; the thought in them is profoundly Jewish, and celebration is directed to God or the Most High. The Odist composed his poetic masterpieces when many of those who believed in Jesus were Jews and when there had been no parting of the ways between "Christians" and "Jews." While almost everything Jewish can be Christian (as in the poetry of the Lord's Prayer), not everything Christian can be Jewish (as the exaltation of the Messiah on the cross).

While the collection is Christian, some *Odes* appear Jewish, perhaps composed before the Odist believed in Jesus' Messiahship. Others may mirror a proto-Gnosticism, an ancient belief that salvation is achieved through personal knowledge; such ideas are also found in the Gospel of John

and other inspired compositions that were not included in the canon, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Hymn of the Pearl*, and the *Gospel of Truth*. Using these definitions and perceptions, here is a list of the character of each *Ode* (forty are extant in Syriac [a Semitic language similar to Aramaic, Jesus' language], five in Coptic [*Pistis Sophia*], one in Greek, and one quotation in Latin):

NO.	THEME	CHARACTER
1	My Wreathed-Crown	Jewish [in *Pistis Sophia*]
2	[lost]	
3	The Beloved	Christian? [not Gnostic]
4	God's Sanctuary	Christian [heavily Jewish]
5	Praising the Lord for Grace and Salvation	Jewish! [in *Pistis Sophia*]
6	Praising His Holy Spirit	Jewish [not Gnostic]
7	The Course of Joy	Christian! [not Gnostic]
8	Fruits of the Lord	Christian [not Gnostic]
9	The Wreathed- Crown of the True Covenant	Jewish [not Gnostic]
10	The Fruit of the Lord's Peace	Christian
11	The Lord's Paradise	Proto-Gnostic [?] very Jewish [in Greek]
12	The Ineffable Word	Christian [not Gnostic]
13	The Lord Is Our Mirror	Jewish or Christian
14	The Odes of Your Truth	Jewish
15	The Lord Is My Sun	Jewish
16	My Work Is The Lord's Psalm	Jewish
17	My Wreathed-Crown Is Living	Christian [heavily Jewish]
18	The Love of the Most High	Jewish
19	The Cup of Milk	Christian! [Latin quotation]
20	A Wreathed-Crown from His Tree	Jewish
21	The Lord's Grace	Jewish [not Gnostic]

NO.	THEME	CHARACTER
22	The Holy Ones' Dwelling Place	Christian! [in *Pistis Sophia*]
23	Joy Is for the Elect Ones	Christian!
24	Our Lord Messiah	Christian!
25	My Helper	Jewish, Christian [in *Pistis Sophia*]
26	The Odists Stand in Serenity	Jewish and Christian
27	The Upright Cross	Christian!
28	Immortal Life Embraced Me	Christian
29	The Lord Is My Hope	Christian
30	The Lord's Living Spring	Jewish, Christian, and Proto-Gnostic
31	Immortal Life	Christian!
32	Joy from the Heart	Christian
33	The Perfect Virgin Is Judge	Christian!
34	The Simple Heart	Proto-Gnostic and Christian
35	The Lord's Dew	Christian
36	The Lord's High Place	Christian
37	The Lips of My Heart	Christian
38	The Light of Truth	Proto-Gnostic and Christian
39	The Lord's Power	Christian [not Gnostic]
40	The Lord's Odes of Immortality	Christian [very Jewish]
41	Our Hearts Mediate in His Love	Christian!
42	The Righteous One: Our Savior	Christian!

The "Christian" *Odes* are extremely close to the types of Jewish thought that were known in the Holy Land before 136 CE. This dimension contrasts with the anti-Judaism that abounds in the New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (gospels and related works not included in the canon) and some other early Christian compositions. It also distinguishes the *Odes* from the two most Jewish

Gospels, Matthew and John, since these Gospels reflect conflicts with other Jewish groups, especially the tensions among Jews after the First Jewish War of 66–73/4. It is odd that the *Odes* discerned to be Proto-Gnostic are not excerpted by the author of the *Pistis Sophia*. Long after the Odist, this author used excerpts from the *Odes*, impressively those that seem Jewish, as prophecies by Solomon (*Pistis Sophia* 114).

What is the significance of the observation that the list shifts to being almost completely Christian beginning with *Ode* 27 and that *Odes* 13 through 21 (except 19) are basically Jewish?

With these preliminary comments on the complex and diverse symbolic theology in the Hymnbook, we can now introduce the most likely conclusions regarding the origin of these fascinating and mystical poems or odes.

Texts

One hundred years ago, the famous Syriac scholar J. Rendel Harris made an unusual discovery. You may share the excitement, listening to his own words which were published in "An Early Christian Hymn-Book," *Contemporary Review* 95 (1909) 414–28:

> On the 4th of January last, having a little leisure time, I thought I would devote it to sorting and identifying a heap of torn and stained paper leaves written in the Syriac language, which had been lying on my shelves for a long time, waiting for attention and not finding it. Amongst them was a bunch of leaves which I took to be a late copy of the conventional Syriac Psalter. It was divided by rubrics, which numbered a series of psalms, such as *Psalm four, Psalm five* and so on, down to *Psalm sixty*. The conventional Psalter was suggested by the fact that a number of them were marked for choral use by the addition of the first letter of the word Hallelujah to the successive stanzas. This is a not uncommon feature in Syriac Psalters. Without any suspicion of anything out of the common, I began to examine the

> text in a leisurely manner, and was presently surprised to find that it was not our regular Hebrew Psalter, but something quire different.

Eventually, Harris was surprised to discover the *Psalms of Solomon* and something further: "Examination also showed that at the beginning of the new book could be found every one of the passages which had been quoted" in the *Pistis Sophia*. He continues: "Further examination showed the very psalm or ode quoted by Lactantius. And since the whole book, with the exception of slight mutilations at the beginning and ending, represented a collection of sixty or sixty-one psalms, it was evident that between two and three times as much Solomonic matter was now to hand as we possessed formerly." What had Harris discovered one hundred years ago? Here are his words: "We have shown that we have undoubtedly recovered the lost book of the Psalms and Odes of Solomon." It is appropriate at this time to publish a popular edition of the *Odes*, since this is the centennial of the discovery of the *Odes*.

Today, we know that the Earliest Christian Hymnbook, the *Odes of Solomon*, is preserved in four manuscripts: two are in Syriac but neither preserves the whole collection of the *Odes*. One manuscript is in Greek, but it preserves only one ode, *Ode* 11. And one is in Coptic; it consists of excerpts from five *Odes* in the *Pistis Sophia* (a fourth-century work of Egyptian Christianity). The *Odes* are quoted only in the early fourth century by Lactantius, who quoted in Latin part of *Ode* 19 (*Div. Inst.* 4.12.3).

Not all of the original 42 *Odes* are extant. *Ode* 1 is most likely preserved in a Coptic citation in the *Pistis Sophia*; but all of *Ode* 2 and the beginning of *Ode* 3 are lost. The collection was perhaps attributed by the Odist to Solomon. It is characterized by the joy and love experienced at the appearance of the Beloved who is the Messiah (*Ode* 7:1–2). Because of God's revelation through the Prophet Nathan, Solomon was hailed as "Jedidiah," that is "Beloved of the Lord" (cf. 2 Samuel 12:25).

Original Language

The original language of the *Odes of Solomon* is perhaps Greek, but most likely an early form of Aramaic-Syriac. The extant Greek preserves Semitisms that suggest an earlier manuscript in Syriac, or better Aramaic-Syriac. The Syriac texts abound in the careful use of words (notably paronomasia and assonance), rhythm, and other linguistic features that indicate the scribe was either an unusually gifted translator or more likely composing these *Odes* in an early form of Aramaic-Syriac.

Date

Specialists on the *Odes* now agree that the collection was completed in the early second century, and most likely before 125 CE. The Greek manuscript (Bodmer Papyrus XI), which dates from the third century CE, was copied from an earlier Greek manuscript that most likely takes us back into the second century CE. That is evident since the scribe inadvertently omits, and later adds in the margins, a portion of the ode. If the original language is not Greek, then we must allow for some time for the *Odes* to be composed and then later translated into Greek. If the *Odes* as a collection predates 125, then the question now to be researched is the date of each ode in the collection. What is the date of the earliest ode in the collection? It is clear that the hymns in a hymnbook were composed over a considerable period and years before they were assembled into a hymnbook.

Place of Origin

Long before the *Odes* were composed, the first world culture appeared; it was the Hellenistic World. Commerce and the movement of ideas traveled from Parthia in the East to Rome in the West and even on to Spain. After the end of the first century BCE, piracy on the high seas was abolished and substantial roads still evident in places today

connected the East with the West. Since there were no barriers to the trafficking of concepts and expressions in the Middle East, it is not easy to discern the place in which a document was composed. The situation applies especially to most documents composed between the death of Herod in 4 BCE and the death of Bar Kokhba in 136 CE.

If the *Odes* were composed in Greek, they could have been written virtually anywhere in the Middle East, including Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. If they were composed in Aramaic-Syriac, then they may have been composed in the Holy Land, perhaps in Galilee, or elsewhere in western Syria. As when assessing most scriptural works on the fringes of a canon that is still open in the second century CE, scholars find it practically impossible to discern the place in which a document was composed.

Perhaps one may offer reflections that are speculative. The obvious affinities between these *Odes* and the Gospel of John make the Holy Land, Ephesus, Antioch, and even western Syria (in the early second century), a likely place of origin. The parallels with the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Gospel of John, and links with Ignatius of Antioch support the hypothesis that the *Odes* may have been composed in or near Antioch or somewhere in western Syria.

Relation to the Old Testament

As a poet only echoes sources, so the Odist only alludes to the books in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible). *Ode* 6 reflects Ezekiel 47, and *Ode* 22:9 echoes Ezekiel 37:4–6. *Ode* 41:9 may be dependent on Proverbs 8:22. *Ode* 8:19 seems influenced by Isaiah 58:8, and *Ode* 16:12 by Genesis 2:2. The Odist is deeply and undeniably influenced by the Psalter; he seems to know it in Hebrew and Greek. *Odes* 7:10 and 9:8–9 are apparently influenced by the Greek of Psalms 50:3 [Hebrew 51:1] and 20:4 [Hebrew 21:3]. In at least two places, the Odist seems to diverge from the Greek text of the Psalter: *Odes* 5:8 and 29:10 follow the Hebrew

(or Syriac) of Psalms 21:11 and 1:4. As expected in a Hymnbook that rejoices in the Messiah's passion, the most influential psalm is Psalm 22; that is, *Ode* 28:14 reflects Psalm 22:16, *Ode* 28:18 mirrors Psalm 22:18, and *Ode* 31:8–13 borrows from Psalm 22:16–18.

Most interesting is how the Odist seems to modify passages in the Psalter that he apparently knew by heart. Notice how he rewrites Psalm 84:10, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere." He reintroduces it as: "For one hour of Your faith / Is more excellent than all days and years" (*Ode* 4:5). Psalm 1:2, "And on His Law they will meditate day and night," most likely helped the Odist with the following composition:

> And let our faces shine in His light.
> And let our hearts mediate in His love,
> By night and by day. (*Ode* 41:6)

Relation to Some Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Scriptures

The abundant and significant links between the *Odes* in the Earliest Christian Hymnbook and compositions among the Dead Sea Scrolls raise the possibility that some Essene compositions may have influenced the Odist. The numerous parallels are especially impressive between the *Odes* and the Scrolls composed at Qumran, namely the *Rule of the Community* (1QS) and the *Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QH). The Odist's dualism (that is, the concept that the cosmos is defined by two opposing forces) seems to reflect the dualism developed in 1QS 3–4. In *Ode* 38, the Odist takes the early Jewish concept of two cosmic spirits, developed to its highest expression in the *Rule of the Community*, and displays them as "the Truth" or "the Beloved and His Bride" and "the Error" or "the Bride who was corrupting" and "the Bridegroom who corrupts and is corrupted."

The Odist's symbolism reflects that found in the *Thanksgiving Hymns*. The unique opening to each hymn in

the *Thanksgiving Hymns*—"I thank you, O Lord, because"—reappears at the beginning of *Ode* 5:

> I praise [thank] you, O Lord,
> Because I love You.

The author of the hymn in col. 16 (formerly col. 8) in the *Thanksgiving Hymns* was influenced by Psalm 1:2 (the righteous are "like trees planted by streams of water"); and he envisioned the Lord planting trees, the righteous ("Trees of Life"), for "an eternal planting." This gifted Qumranite would have been pleased with the ending of *Ode* 38:

> And the Lord alone was praised,
> In His planting and in His cultivation.
>
> In His care and in the blessing of His lips,
> In the beautiful planting of His right hand.
>
> Hallelujah (38:20–22)

The *Odes* and the major sectarian Qumran scrolls contain numerous shared beliefs and symbolic thoughts, such as a consciousness of being "the Way," the dwelling place of the Holy Ones that God has founded upon the rock, and God's planting for His glory. The sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Odes* in similar salvific ways reflect the use of symbols and terms like "knowledge," "the war," "crown," "living water," and "the sun." Apparently, the *Odes* and the Dead Sea Scrolls share more than the same Palestinian milieu. The editor of the Greek fragment of *Ode* 11, M. Testuz, concluded it was inspired in exceptional ways by themes from the *Thanksgiving Hymns* and that *Ode* 11 was the work of an Essene. Dead Sea Scrolls expert and *Odes* scholar, J. Carmignac, concluded that the Odist probably had been a member of the Qumran Community. My own research suggests that the Odist may not have been a Qumranite, but he seems to have been influenced by the Essenes and conceivably once had been an Essene; that is, before he believed in Jesus' Messiahship, he may have originally been a member of one of the numerous Essene

communities that were located on the fringes of towns or cities in the Holy Land (as Philo and Josephus reported).

The Odist breathes the atmosphere of the Jewish apocalypses that were composed between 300 BCE and 100 CE. When the Odist composed *Ode* 16:13–17, he may have been influenced by *1 Enoch* 2:1—5:2 and 69:20–21 in which early Jews recorded their belief that the luminaries do not change their orbits and that the sun and moon complete their courses and do not deviate from the eternal ordinance. But I would caution against literary influence, since the theme was common in Second Temple Judaism.

Was the Odist influenced by the *Parables of Enoch* (*1 Enoch* 37–71), a Jewish apocalyptic work most likely composed in Galilee just before Jesus' public ministry? The Odist imagines the naming of the Messiah as the Son of Man and his elevation. Note the words the Odist attributes to the Messiah:

> (The Spirit) brought Me forth before the Lord's face.
> And because I was the Son of Man,
> I was named the Light, the Son of God. (*Ode* 36:3)

During this elevation through naming, the Son of Man who is now the Son of God receives his anointing, his Messiahship: "And He anointed Me with His perfection; /And I became one of those who are near Him" (*Ode* 36:6). The Odist's imagination seems influenced by the scene found only in the *Parables of Enoch* in which Enoch sees "the throne of glory" and "the fountain of righteousness" and then:

> At that hour, that Son of Man was given a name, in the presence of the Lord of the Spirits, the Before-Time; even before the creation of the sun and the moon, before the creation of the stars, he was given a name in the presence of the Lord of the Spirits."
> (*1 Enoch* 48:2–3; E. Isaac in *OTP* 1.35).

It seems likely that the Odist knew the traditions preserved in the *Parables of Enoch*.

With the authors of *1 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, and *2 Baruch*, and also with Jesus from Nazareth, the Odist perceives present crises in terms of the promising world above and the world to come. With the early Jewish apocalypticists, he imagines ascending into heaven and seeing the world below: "I went up into the light of Truth as into a chariot, / And Truth led me and allowed me to proceed" (*Ode* 38:1).

Relation to the Documents in the New Testament

The *Odes* were composed before documents were collected into a corpus, the New Testament, and we should not expect the Odist, as a poet, to quote from these documents. Yet, scholars have rightly perceived traditions preserved in the New Testament are evident in this Hymnbook. The traditions that Jesus was born of a Virgin appear in *Ode* 19, his baptism in *Ode* 24, and his walking on the water in *Ode* 39. Jesus' Passion and Crucifixion seem mirrored in *Odes* 8:5; 27:1–3; 28:9–20; 31:8–13; and 42:1–2. The tradition preserved in Matthew 16:18 ("And on this rock I will build my church") seems reflected in *Ode* 22:

> And the foundation of everything is Your rock.
> And upon it You built Your kingdom.
> And it became the dwelling place of the holy ones. (22:12).

The most striking and significant parallels between the *Odes* and a New Testament document are with the Gospel of John. Both contain the Word Christology (that is, both portray Jesus as the pre-existent Word who took on flesh in human space and time). Both place an emphasis on love, and the reception of eternal life through the drinking of "living water." One of the premier experts on the *Odes* today, M. Lattke, is correct in pointing out the extreme importance of the *Odes* for studying the origins of the documents in the NT.